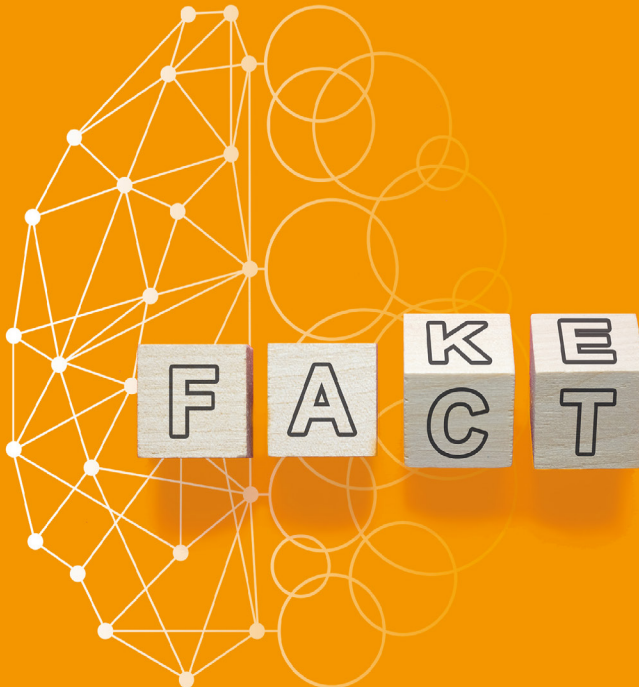# Countering online misinformation and conspiracy theories

Recommendations
from scholars and
practitioners in the
DACH region
(Germany, Austria,
Switzerland)

Background and objective of the recommendations

Misinformation, half-truths, and conspiracy theories can cause considerable harm to society. They can lead people to ignore or deny scientific evidence, refuse to follow public health guidelines, marginalise certain social groups, and even legitimise violence. Therefore, it is crucial to take effective measures to counter their spread.

Researchers from the Swiss Young Academy (SYA) and the University of Zurich have decided to tackle this challenge head-on. In a three-wave Delphi study (i.e. a study in which experts assess current and future developments in multiple rounds), 47 scholars and practitioners from 13 countries were asked to identify current challenges in responding to online misinformation and conspiracy theories, to predict developments in this area, and to use these findings to develop targeted measures that respond to the challenges.

The recommendations presented in this flyer are specifically aimed at the DACH region (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and are intended to support decision-makers in politics, technology platforms, journalism, academia, and other fields.

TO THE PROJECT'S WEB PAGE

TO THE WEB PAGE OF THE SWISS YOUNG ACADEMY

Insufficient digital media and information literacy and societal resilience

- Insufficient financial resources and too few initiatives for improving digital media and information literacy of different social groups in the long term

- Lack of targeted intervention strategies to enable citizens to recognise and protect themselves from false or misleading content and conspiracy theories

- Loss of trust in social institutions and their representatives

Transnational distribution and regulatory gaps

- Inadequate implementation of regulatory measures, developed in accordance with national laws and regulations aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories on global social media platforms

- Lack of transparent content moderation on social media platforms that strikes a balance between respecting the right to freedom of expression and limiting false or misleading information and conspiracy theories

- Lack of adequate mechanisms to automate the identification and flagging of misinformation and conspiracy theories

- Lack of transparency about how algorithms curate content on digital platforms

Shortage of journalistic resources and gaps in scientific knowledge

- Lack of (long-term) funding for science journalism and independent fact-checkers

- Limited access for scientists, journalists, and fact-checkers to data related to the content, distribution, and users on digital platforms

- Shortage of transnational research and longitudinal studies on the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories and on the effectiveness of intervention strategies

Promote professional journalism and independent fact-checking

Journalists and independent fact-checkers contribute significantly to promoting a well-informed society. Objective, careful, and transparent reporting and independent fact-checking is essential to this task, as they help to strengthen the public's trust in the media and curb the spread of false or misleading information by swiftly correcting it. In addition, journalists and fact-checkers can raise public awareness of manipulative strategies. As this is time- and resource-intensive, long-term financial support for professional (science) journalism and the development of a fact-checking infrastructure spanning organisations and countries needs to be secured. Moreover, fact-checking should be taught and promoted as part of a journalist's work. Fostering collaboration between journalists, fact-checkers, and experts from different sectors of society will not only ensure the quality of reporting but also increase trust in journalism. In addition, journalists and fact-checkers can help support educational initiatives that promote media literacy.

Create transparent monitoring by a civil society platform council

Digital platforms significantly shape how people communicate with each other, how information is generated and spread, and how decision-making processes are structured. In recent years, this influence on the formation of public opinion has increased considerably. Consequently, experts from the study assign digital platforms a central role in countering misinformation and conspiracy theories. Self-regulation by these platforms, however, has proven insufficient in addressing these problems, which is why legal frameworks need to be created at the policy level.

These legal frameworks should require digital platforms to be more transparent about how their recommendation algorithms work. In addition, misinformation and conspiracy theories on digital platforms need to be monitored at the international level so that platforms can react to problematic content at an early stage. This requires specific indicators for classifying potentially harmful content, as well as data-based simulations and projections about its spread.

The experts recommend assessing whether independent bodies, known as platform councils, could be created to advise and monitor digital platforms. These bodies should be comprised of selected users and experts to represent the interests of private citizens, business, and politics, and to take into account journalistic and scientific expertise when making decisions on critical issues related to freedom of expression and disinformation. In their oversight role, platform councils should have access to platforms' algorithmic selection processes and content moderation practices, evaluate them, and impose sanctions where necessary.

Improve digital media and information literacy

Promoting digital media and information literacy supports the development of an informed, resilient society that is better able to recognise and counter misinformation, and to curb the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. These skills help people to critically examine (mis)information and its sources and, if necessary, to verify them on their own. This enables people to better recognise and avoid potentially false or misleading content and possible conspiracy theories.

These skills should be taught not only in schools but also in adult education programmes, for example through public funding or foundations. It is important that the knowledge and skills taught are adapted to the relevant target group and continually updated. Educating people about journalistic quality standards and fact-checking, about (inter)national media systems, and about how digital platforms and algorithms work is also key to this goal.

Improve the transfer of scientific knowledge

Effectively communicating scientific information can help sharpen awareness of misinformation, half-truths, and conspiracy theories and prevent their spread. It can also encourage the public to rely on trustworthy, established sources. To date, the body of research amassed on misinformation and conspiracy theories includes a considerable number of studies. Now, the aim of effective, audience-appropriate science communication must be to translate complex scientific findings into language that is easily understood by the target audience, thus making scientific information accessible to a broader audience. This, in turn, can help debunk false or misleading claims. During this process, however, it is important to communicate any uncertainties and limitations to scientific findings. Moreover, it is important to explore how to reach out to groups that have so far been beyond the reach of these efforts. This requires applied research on the scientific evaluation of science communication.

Along with universities and communication departments, researchers themselves engage in science communication. This calls for professional training in communication and incentives for such activities, as well as specialised institutions to which researchers can turn when they are confronted with hostile behaviour in response to their efforts to counter misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Information about the study

The results of the study can be summarised as follows: According to the study's experts, many of today's challenges will remain relevant or become even more pressing in the coming years. The experts emphasise that curbing false or misleading content and conspiracy theories on digital platforms will require a combination of individual measures and collaboration between different stakeholders and social groups.

ADDITIONAL
INFORMATION

Swiss Young Academy
The Swiss Young Academy is a network for early career academics and provides an inspiring environment for inter- and transdisciplinary exchange and innovative ideas. The Swiss Young Academy belongs to the network of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences.

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